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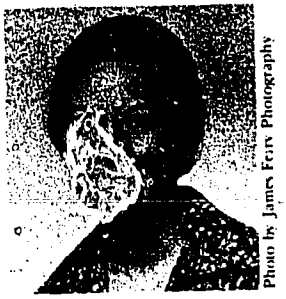
ABSTRACT

Student absenteeism has been declining in the United States since records were first kept in the late nineteenth century. Even so, some districts, usually urban, have found absentee rates doubling or even tripling over the last ten years. The tendency of teacher absenteeism to rise in districts where student absenteeism has increased sharply merely adds to the problem. The absence of students affects not only the funding available to most schools (often dependent on average daily attendance figures) but the education of the truant students and the ability of the educational system to teach effectively those students who do attend. To date no major studies have focused successfully on the correlations between student and teacher absence rates or the specific root causes of absenteeism. This document discusses the factors involved in this dilemma, including the rationales for attendance expectations; the intentions behind and alternatives to compulsory schooling; the characteristics of absentees; and the relationships of school size, school programs, and the educational environment to absence rates. The document concludes with brief descriptions of nine programs designed to reduce absenteeism in schools around the country. (Author/PGD)



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Student and Teacher Absenteeism

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Absenteeism: Overview of the Problem

A kindergarten teacher asked a school social worker to observe a child in her class. At the tender age of 5, this boy had developed a regular pattern of absence, disturbing to his teacher. The teacher had been unable to reach the boy's parents by telephone. The social worker observed the child in class and noticed nothing unusual about his play behavior. Finally, he called the boy aside to ask him why he was absent every Thursday. He told the child how much everyone liked him at school and how they enjoyed having him there. Why was it he did not come to school on Thursdays? Was there something about school activities on that day of the week that he disliked? Was there some problem at home that kept him there?

"No problem," replied the boy, his face lighting up. "But you see, my mother is an opera singer and she travels a lot. Thursday is the day she has arranged to stay at home to love me."

The social worker melted upon hearing the young boy's explanation, then went to convey the message to his teacher and the principal. Together they agreed that spending Thursdays with his mother was in the child's personal and educational best interests. (The boy continued to make a good adjustment to school on the remaining four days of the week.)

In one sense, this child's reason for being absent from school is highly unusual. In fact, there may not be another student in the public school population of 45 million in precisely this set of circumstances. The school's response was also somewhat unusual, but exemplary. An alert teacher, spotting a possible problem, called in special help. Both professionals showed great sensitivity to the child's needs and were

careful not to do or say anything to reinforce a pattern of school avoidance that might get worse.

The fact that the child was still too young to be bound by state compulsory attendance laws made the school's deference to family need easier in this case. Still, it should be possible for schools to work out flexible schedules for older students with special needs. When schools do not listen to students, Thursday absences can extend to Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

In another sense, the opera singer's son has much in common with some of the 3.5 million other school children who are absent from school each day. Like many nonattenders, his reason for being absent is personal. It has little or nothing to do with his satisfaction with school life. Unfortunately, many personal reasons for being absent are not as beneficial to the student's emotional growth as staying home "to be loved." Family turmoil and the special family problems brought on by poverty are more likely to be root causes of school absence.

When chronic absenteeism cannot be traced to personal causes, the school is wise to look for institutional causes. For some reason or combination of reasons, the school environment does not meet a child's needs. He or she reacts by escaping. The child breaks the law to avoid school. It may be all day or part of the day. Older students, aware they may be disciplined for truancy, often arrange to be in class for roll call, then disappear, either leaving school or staying in the halls with other in-school absentees and frequently causing trouble.

Some school-caused absenteeism may be simply a result of inappropriate placement in a class that is either too difficult or too easy for the child. It may be a personality conflict with a teacher that leads a student to skip class regularly. Usually, though, the causes of chronic absenteeism are more subtle and complex. Even when students are confronted, it may be difficult for them to explain or to change their pattern of truancy. Typically, truant problems stem from a combination of home and school factors. As pressures and disincentives to attend school build on both fronts, the student becomes more inclined to skip school. When the syndrome escalates within a school or school district, as it has done in many urban settings, the system loses its ability to find students, investigate their problems, and correct them. Like a snowball

rolling downhill, the problem compounds itself, and peer influence along the way makes skipping school the "in" thing. Administrative response at this point is nearly always punitive. Containment or pushing out a student who is old enough may be the best an overworked administrator can do. Tragically, some truants are never noticed at all. Ghosts in the system, they are officially on the rolls but are seldom or never in class.

Unauthorized absences appear to be increasing in our schools, and administrators are concerned. While data gathered by the National Center for Educational Statistics show a continuing decline in the percentage of student absences nationally (the downward trend has been continuous since records were first kept in the latter part of the nineteenth century), administrators in individual districts, particularly in urban systems, claim overall absences have doubled, or even tripled, in the last 10 years. They say the rising percentage of unauthorized absences is pushing the figure up. The current annual-rate of student absenteeism is 8% nationally, but daily rates of 30% are not uncommon in urban secondary schools. The *Baltimore Sun* and the *New York Times* have each reported that in their cities of publication on any one day absentees may outnumber students present in school. Shocking statistics like these no doubt contributed to the opinion among members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 1973 and again in 1974 that student absenteeism was administrators' "most perplexing student problem," even ahead of discipline. The next year, absenteeism dropped slightly in their concern, giving vandalism the edge. The two problems are related, however, with chronic absentees frequently involved in disciplinary action and school and local crimes. When a solution is found for one, frequently the other problem disappears.

If truancy is really on the rise, how can attendance figures nationwide hold their own or actually improve? Medical experts say that illness should account for no more than 4% of student absences, about half the reported totals. Parents often sanction other reasons for missing school, including vacations and family outings, but few schools recognize them as "excused" or legitimate reasons for missing class. Inoculations against childhood diseases like mumps and measles, plus

improved public health care for low income families, have probably helped lower the number of absences due to illness in the past 20 years. Another contributing factor to stable absentee figures may be that they are inaccurate. It is no secret that school districts, on their honor to report average daily attendance (ADA) to their state departments of education, have been known to inflate attendance statistics when state funding is based on ADA. Still, it is impossible for schools to hide a significant number of truants in inflated attendance figures. Actually, loss of state revenue has been a strong incentive for administrators to put their heads together and come up with possible solutions.

Loss of state funds is only one problem caused by absent students. It may seem obvious, but few students can benefit from public education if they are not in class. No conscientious teacher or principal can help but feel thwarted when children are not present to learn. Such natural events as holidays, teachers' conventions, assemblies, snow, and power failures provide enough diversions from the regular course of study without a teacher having to backtrack for students who missed the last class. If too many are absent, little or no progress is made. Other negative consequences for schools are the increased paper and leg work involved in handling the pesky administrative detail of keeping track of absent students. Knowing that the time and money would be better spent improving the educational program is a source of much frustration to building administrators.

School administrators are also beginning to worry about the rising absences of teachers. A 1977 poll of National Association of Secondary School Principals members showed that 15% consider the problem serious and another 59% say it is a minor problem at their school. Indications are that in districts where student absences increase dramatically, so do teacher absences, yet we have no clear understanding of why this is so.

New York City; Newark, New Jersey; and Philadelphia have each conducted independent studies in an attempt to curb rising teacher absences. These and a few other scattered studies show that teachers and other school employees seem to extend weekends with a Friday or Monday absence or go fishing on a beautiful spring day just as students

do. Further, patterns of absence for teachers are closely correlated with the benefits bargained for by their unions. If teachers are allowed 10 days sick leave a year, they manage to call in sick an average of 9.9 days. As yet, we don't have enough data on personal factors related to teacher absence to compare with student studies. But we do know that job satisfaction, related to such factors as a safe teaching environment and receptive students, has a positive effect on teacher attendance records.

School boards and citizens committees have practical reasons to investigate teacher absenteeism. Like student absenteeism, it hits them in the pocketbook. Gone are the days when the cost of a substitute teacher is deducted from the regular teacher's per diem pay. It is a bother for administrators to find someone to cover a classroom on short notice, and frequently that someone contributes little to the learning process and may actually detract from it.

One purpose of this fastback is to get educators thinking about the connections between the absences of teachers and students. Under what circumstances does one affect the other? What is it about some school settings that drives both students and teachers from the classrooms in great numbers? To date no formal study that I know of has focused on these correlations. When a school is plagued by a 30% absence rate daily, the administration should know where the absences are occurring. Are they spread evenly over the school, or are there some pockets of absenteeism possibly accounted for by poor curriculum or a particular approach to teaching?

I am not suggesting that all student absences are related to teachers and the curriculum. (One researcher has suggested, if getting a public education were as easy as getting an injection, some children would still avoid it.) But if student and teacher absences are both on the rise, educators would do well to examine the changing conditions that bring on this behavior. Many of our public school teachers are only four years removed from being public school pupils themselves. If there are major changes in attitudes and motivation toward the public schools, these will be found among the recent products of the system as well as in the current student population. Until we identify these changes, we are not likely to find a lasting solution to the absentee problem.

Attendance Expectations

Public schools have certain expectations for the regular attendance of students and teachers. When they are not met, classroom performance suffers. Even occasional absences cause some learning disruption, but frequent absences of students or a teacher can severely reduce academic progress. When a student is absent, schooling is disrupted for that particular student. If several students are absent and the teacher finds it necessary to use class time to bring these students up to date, then the pace is slowed for the entire class. Even more dire consequences may result when teachers are absent. Most substitutes, called on short notice with no time for preparation, are little more than babysitters in the classroom. Even those who know their subject are at a disadvantage because they don't know the students and it may be harder for them to maintain discipline. When teachers absent themselves by striking or when they engage in work slowdowns, student motivation lags. This kind of behavior by teachers gives students a lackadaisical attitude about their own attendance. High rates of student absence frequently accompany a breakdown in teacher negotiations.

The number of days students are expected to attend school annually is set by each state education agency, generally in the vicinity of 180 days. Attendance expectations for teachers vary, but they usually exceed somewhat the number of days for students in order to allow for beginning of the year planning, end of the year cleanup, and several inservice days during the school year. For teachers, 185 to 190 days is typically required.

Attendance for students is usually defined as being present for the five to six hours classes are held. For teachers, add to that the time before and after class they are expected to be available to provide extra help for students, to talk to parents, or to assist with extracurricular activities. In some places teachers are granted released time for parent and student conferences or other extra duties. The federal law now requiring individual learning plans for handicapped children is an example of a mandate requiring a lot of extra time and effort by some teachers. Those who teach a number of handicapped children may be granted a lighter class load to compensate for the numerous planning sessions and conferences required.

Subtracted from the days teachers are expected to be in attendance are a defined number of days they may use for sick leave, personal leave, serving on a jury, mourning the death of a family member, attending union meetings, and in some places, extra days convalescing from illnesses contracted from students or from injuries inflicted by them. Sick leave minimums (10 days a year is common) are set by the state, but days beyond the minimum are bargainable at the district level.

For students, who are not paid to be in school but who are compelled to attend by state compulsory attendance laws, the number of days sick must be accounted for. Building administrators usually excuse an absence of one or several days on the word of the teacher or parents of the child. Absences beyond three days for students or teachers usually must be certified by a doctor, but this requirement is frequently waived. For instance, during a flu epidemic when large numbers of students and faculty are ill, it is recognized that this particular disease responds to self-treatment as well as to a doctor's, even though absences of a week or even two are sometimes necessary for recovery.

For students, legitimate absences are usually limited to illness and family emergencies. Frequently, however, there are limits on excused absences if a student is to pass a course or proceed to the next grade. Some local attendance policies say if students miss 20 or 30 days or more for any reason, they will not receive credit, regardless of whether or not they are able to make up homework and pass examinations. If students ask to be excused during the school day for medical appointments, become ill during class, or leave school for a reason their par-

ents and school administrator agree is legitimate, students usually receive "credit" for the day. Likewise, if schools close early because of weather, power failure, riots, or other unforeseeable disasters, the day usually "counts" if four hours of classes have been held before students and teachers are asked to leave.

"Counting" and "receiving credit" refer to formulas devised by state education departments to allot state aid to schools in direct proportion to the number of students who attend each local school. When this formula is derived from the average daily attendance (ADA), schools have an incentive to see to it that students are present, not merely on the rolls.

In some states, the note from home describing an illness or other "excused" or "authorized" absence is all important to the school for purposes of state funding. Other states do not give consideration to "excused" absences for purposes of funding. In order to receive credit, the child must be in school. Utah requires the physical presence of a child in the funding count, but the Salt Lake City school system has worked out an arrangement with the state department where, under carefully supervised conditions, students who do their school work at home during an illness are counted present. Getting the state to bend on this point has helped raise the district's pupil count by 2.5% and has brought $200,000 more to the school coffers annually.

Since the reliability of parental notes is difficult to assess, some schools have dropped the distinction between excused and unexcused absences. Instead, students are given the equivalent of sick leave and personal leave—a certain number of days they may take with no questions asked. As the limit is approached, a warning-letter is sent home. If the number of days is exceeded, no credit is given in the course or grade.

Teacher absences also cost schools money. In addition to hiring substitutes, there are administrative expenses and record keeping costs. Sick leave not taken also costs schools money. Some systems allow as much as 200 days to be accumulated and exchanged for cash when a teacher leaves the system or retires.

In most other work settings, particularly in professional and managerial job slots, when a worker is absent; the work waits. If the em-

ployee had appointments or clients to see, they are put off until another day or covered by others already on the payroll. But students, the clients of schooling, cannot be told to come another day. They are compelled by law to be in school. Only if most of the staff is ill or involved in a job action will classes be cancelled and made up at the end of the year. For all the learning that goes on when short-term substitutes are assigned to cover classes, students may well do better to make up those classes with their regular teacher at the end of the year. They would get more education, the system would not have to pay for substitutes, and teachers would be held to the actual number of days of teaching in their contracts. But this reform would be complicated to implement and would meet with opposition from several factions. Older students and teachers may have summer jobs lined up. Families have planned vacations. Working parents would have to arrange for babysitters for younger children. Unscheduled days off present problems.

As things now stand, schools must budget large sums for substitutes (Los Angeles pays $12 million a year for substitutes). Another growing trend, overtime pay for teachers on the payroll or permanent substitutes to cover absent teachers' classes, is even more expensive. In these times of tight budgets, administrators understandably try to reduce the number of teacher absences, thereby reducing the substitute tab.

In earlier times schools attempted to discourage teacher absenteeism by deducting the per diem of the substitute from the teacher's salary. Times have changed, and any school system announcing this policy today would find itself threatened by a strike. Sick leave benefits for teachers were created during periods when teachers were in short supply, during and after World War II. They were cemented by the growing power of teacher unions during the 1960s. Teachers now have job security like employees in other industries and there is no turning back.

As yet we have no national monitor on teacher attendance that is in any way as complete as the data we have on students. The National Center for Educational Statistics is the collection point for national student statistics, the Department of Labor the keeper of teacher data. The Department of Labor does not yet break down teachers as an em-

tity distinct from other employees in the education industry (it says such a breakdown is coming, though). Teachers are included with all full-time wage earners in education ranging from custodians to superintendents. Overall, education employees are absent 3.6% of the time (as of May, 1976). This sounds pretty good compared to the 8% of students who are absent. Nevertheless, if this figure is at all accurate for the nation's 2.4 million public school teachers, it means that on any one day 86,000 classrooms are covered by someone other than the regular teacher.

The other information kept by the federal government about teacher attendance is the number of work days teachers are idle because of strikes. In calendar year 1976, 65,000 teachers walked out of classrooms, being idle for a total of 713,500 work days. The year before, things were worse with the largest number of school strikes in history, involving 182,000 teachers for a total of 1,419,800 work days. While this caused serious interruption of learning, most of these days were made up at the end of the term.

Corporations keep close tabs on employee attendance. Absent workers are a loss of money to them and any rise in absentee rates is countered quickly with measures to reduce it. In schools, where taxpayers foot the bill, the wheels turn much slower. It may be several years before citizens become aware of excessive absences. The National School Boards Association, the organization that represents the interests of school boards that employ teachers, does not research teacher absenteeism. Local school boards that have identified rising teacher absenteeism as a problem must do their own research, but they have very few sound figures and studies to guide them. This is in sharp contrast to student absenteeism, which has been well researched.

Compulsory Schooling—Past, Present, and Future

If one reviews the history of student attendance in public schools, today's children are performing admirably. More students are attending for more days each year and are staying in school longer than ever before. There are, however, pockets of student absenteeism that are absolutely unacceptable and growing worse, particularly in large cities. When the U.S. government first started collecting statistics on enrollment in 1870, only about 55% of the youngsters between 5 and 17 attended public schools. Of those enrolled, 60% was the average attendance rate. By 1900, 70% were enrolled and attendance had climbed to 70%. In 1940 enrollment approached 90%, attendance 80%. In 1970 enrollment and attendance both topped 90%, and by 1976 enrollment and attendance had edged up slightly again. (Enrollment did dip slightly during the 1950s and 60s, but attendance as a percent of the eligible school population held steady.)

If we believe the charts, schooling is succeeding better than ever before in attracting and holding its student population. If this is true, why are some educators describing their school districts with such headlines as "The Attendance Nightmare" (Savannah, Georgia) and "Truancy, the Epidemic of the 70's" (Bronx, New York)? One social commentator has stated that the very success of our schools in retaining a high percentage of students is directly related to high truancy rates in some communities. For a variety of reasons, students who would rather be out of school and working have been persuaded to stay. Fifty or 100 years ago they would not have been school statistics. Because they were not expected to attend school until they were 16 or graduated, they were not listed as failures or dropouts.

The history of compulsory schooling in this country has been one of ever increasing demands for students to attend school for longer periods. Most states currently require that students attend school between the ages of 7 and 16. Arizona and Maryland allow students to leave at 15. Several others, including Wisconsin and Oklahoma, require students to stay until 18 if they have not yet graduated from high school.

Compulsory education laws first appeared on the books in the early 1800s. A requirement of 12 weeks per year for children 7 to 15 years old was common. Gradually, expectations for school attendance grew until by the turn of the century, 33 states required nine months of schooling a year for most children, but few enforced these laws. Then with the passage of child labor laws, states started putting teeth into their attendance requirements. While we might like to think that the movement to take children out of factories and put them in schools was motivated by interest in children's welfare, historians see other interests as well. David Tyack and others have pointed somewhat cynically to the unions, legislators, and corporate powers of the time, all of whom had their own reasons for keeping children in the classroom nine months of the year. Compulsory schooling kept older children out of the labor market, thus lessening the competition for jobs. (This was particularly true during the Great Depression and at other times when jobs were scarce.)

The public schools also became the agents for "Americanizing" the immigrants whose values and behavior differed from those of the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant establishment. Twelve years of schooling could transform immigrants into solid American citizens. Such a system could teach immigrant children enough job skills to keep them from being a drain on society, but could also limit those skills to preserve the class stratification in occupations so as not to threaten the existing power structure. Of course these reasons were not likely to be explained to students of American history either at that time or now. Still, it took a century of pressure and legislation requiring school attendance before nonattendance or "dropping out" was considered deviant behavior.

Compulsory education laws in this country continue to be debated

to this day. New societal pressures are likely to cause some significant changes. While the opportunity for public schooling well may be extended beyond twelfth grade, the obligation for students to be schooled is not apt to be extended. In fact, if the recent recommendations of the Kettering Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education are adopted, the maximum age for compulsory schooling may be dropped to 14. Compulsory education laws will likely shift their emphasis from keeping students in school to making sure that public institutions that might wish to exclude certain students are prevented from doing so. Schools will be compelled to accommodate all who want to be educated, regardless of age or circumstances.

When the Children's Defense Fund published *Children Out of School in America* in 1974, nearly every state listed a statutory exemption from compulsory attendance laws for children handicapped by physical, mental, or emotional disabilities; a handful discouraged or excluded married or pregnant students; and a dozen listed "distance from school" or "no high school in district" as a reason for excluding children from a public education. A body of case law has grown during the 1970s giving married students solid grounds for challenging regulations that exclude them from a public education. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), passed in 1975, now requires schools to provide appropriate programs for these children. (See Phi Delta Kappa fastback 124, *Mainstreaming: Merging Regular and Special Education*). With the institution's obligation now clear, states are moving to remove exemptions that formerly allowed parents to keep handicapped children at home unschooled. In view of the change in law for the handicapped, the Children's Defense Fund's estimate that there are one million children between the ages 7 and 15 not attending school should be down when a subsequent survey is conducted. But some statistics, like the number of students prevented from attending school because of suspension or expulsion, have not improved. Such disciplinary actions affect the attendance of 5% of the student population in some states and as much as 10% of students in minority groups.

Profiles of School Absentees: Student and Teacher

The portrait of a chronic student absentee looks something like this: He is male, a member of a minority group, lives in a poor neighborhood with one parent or a guardian. There are younger children in the family, frequently an infant requiring a babysitter. The child stays up late on school nights watching television, comes to school without breakfast. He does not speak standard English and has a poor self-concept. He does not participate in extracurricular activities and is not singled out by other students for honors (class officer, best dancer, sports team leader). He has average or better ability but makes poor grades. In class he may be disruptive or taciturn. He has been identified for remediation in basic skills. He attended summer school where his attendance record was even worse.

Does this mean that all students filling this description will have poor attendance records? Of course not. Children are individuals, not statistics. Many deserve our admiration for attending school regularly and succeeding there in spite of great odds against them. For others, all they need is only slight provocation to avoid school.

If the student's motivation to attend school is borderline, any of the following absence-prone conditions may be enough to keep him out on any one occasion: "It's Monday, I need an extra day. It's Friday, I'm tired of school. It's raining, too much effort to get to school. The bus is late, not my fault. It's the day before or after a holiday, not much going on, anyway. It's the first nice spring day, everyone gets spring fever, let's go cruising."

Another problem with student absenteeism is caused by students who cut certain classes but remain on school grounds and are counted as present. Some in-school absentees may be physically present in class while being tuned out to class activity. Others are "hall people" who arrive for roll call and then slip out. All rely on social promotion and a good attendance record to get through school.

Some teachers share absentee habits with students, especially those of high Monday and Friday absence rates. Nancy Karweit of Johns Hopkins University says high Monday absences are peculiar to teachers and high school students, possibly because a desire to extend the weekend is mostly an adult behavior. She also accuses schools of reinforcing the pattern of Monday-Friday absences by not scheduling special events on these days in anticipation of a large number of absences. This is the time schools ought to schedule assemblies, cultural events, pep rallies, special recognition days, and the best lunch of the week as attendance incentives.

We have far fewer data about the patterns of teacher absenteeism relating to such factors as age, sex, race, time of year, level of instruction, and subject area than we do for students. In 1970, 56 districts in Philadelphia participated in studies of employee absences. Increased absenteeism among all school employees (including teachers) was associated with these factors: urban transportation, women who take jobs for "luxury" money, alcohol and drug use, young hedonistic tendencies, marital and family trouble, child care problems, extended holidays, and lack of interest in job.

Specific factors possibly affecting teacher attendance identified in the same study included: staff morale, education program, salary scale, student attitudes, professional expectations and attitudes of teachers, administrative leadership, working conditions, emotional stress and strain, climate and weather, physical weakness and chronic illness, and policies for supplemental remuneration.

It was also found that female teacher had poorer records than male in both absence-resistant and absence-prone settings. (Among students, girls in most grades have poorer attendance records than boys, although the stereotype of the truant is male.) This is corroborated by a study of teachers in Newark, New Jersey. The same study showed white

teachers had the highest absence rates (7.1%), followed by black (6.3%) and Hispanic teachers (5.3%). Teachers with tenure had higher absence rates (7.2%) than nontenured (6.1%).

Increased distance from school also appeared to affect adversely a teacher's attendance; this is not the case, however, in those studies that examined the effect of the child's distance from school on attendance. Attendance by bused students is as good or better than that of those walking or riding to school in cars, except when other factors come into play. (Resistance to desegregation busing and fear of robbery or assault while waiting for buses have been cited by students and parents.)

It would be inappropriate to draw too many conclusions from this scattered data on teachers. In some cases even the indicators of absence-prone students should be reexamined under better controls and using broader geographic samples. These findings of individual school systems about their own students and teacher populations may be a starting point for others concerned about the problem. Certainly the information ought not be used to stereotype groups of students or teachers because of their sex, race, or family life.

Questions Raised by the Attendance Problem

Do teachers abuse their sick leave privileges? Most probably abuse them a little, and a few abuse them a lot. But the way in which administrative policies contribute to abuse is unclear. A study of 12 school districts in Nassau County, New York, showed that teacher absences were 20% higher in the six districts limiting sick leave to a specified number of days. Staff may have the attitude that they should use all days coming to them. When the number of sick leave days is not specified, those on their honor to use only the days they need may be discouraged from taking extra days because they are unsure of the acceptable limit. Other schools have arrived at different conclusions from studying teacher absence patterns.

A 1970 study in the Philadelphia area involved 56 districts with 12,000 teachers on the payroll. The district reported 71,000 absences per year. About 2,000 absences were covered by school staff, leaving 69,000 substitute days to pay. With substitute pay at a modest $29.87 a day, this added approximately $2 million to the school budgets in all the districts combined. The study found that the 11 districts whose sick leave benefits matched the minimum allowed by the state (10 days) had the lowest rate of teacher absence. Teachers whose unions had bargained for additional days or who were granted more days at the discretion of local school boards had higher rates. The study also found that rates were higher in schools requiring proof of all illness and in which an answering service had been set up to report absences for the day. Absences were lower in districts where teachers were ac-

countable personally only to the principal when absent. While it would be premature to draw conclusions from isolated studies, it appears that stringent rules and formalized reporting procedures are not necessarily inducements to teachers to improve attendance. Taking the time one needs for illness or other necessary leave without rigid limits seems to work for students and teachers alike when they know they are directly accountable for their time.

Newark, New Jersey, is another school system concerned about a rising number of reported illnesses among teachers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s teachers called in sick from 9% to 12% of the time, in contrast to the 2% to 4% reported in the private business sector. Each teacher was allowed up to 15 days sick leave a year. In a subsequent plan to reduce absences, it was found that short-term absences were the easiest to curb and were therefore implicated as the most frequent kind of abuse.

New York City schools report double the number of student and teacher absentees experienced in the average school. The city launched a three-year campaign beginning in the 1973-74 school year to reduce teacher absences and their costs. The system was spending $200,000 a day for substitutes, who, although they were not unionized, had their own sick leave and benefits package. Per diem for substitutes was $60 and was raised to $62 in 1974-75. The city's total expense for substitute teachers that year was down slightly, however, due to greater utilization of teachers on staff to cover classrooms.

Then in 1975-76 the first effects of the city's financial crisis hit the schools. Fewer substitutes were used, their pay was cut by a third, and their benefits eliminated. Teacher absences fell from 5.7% to 4.9% over the two-year period, and the schools were able to save half the money formerly paid out to substitutes. The money saved spared the job of one regular teacher at each school. Part of the plan to reduce teacher absences was the reminder that sick leave abuse was unprofessional and could lead to dismissal. If that threat was ever carried out in New York City, it has not come to light. Union officials there said they could not recall a single tenured teacher ever having been dismissed for excessive absence.

Many teachers agree that sick leave use is higher than it ought to be,

but they blame stress-producing working conditions rather than personal abuse of leave policies. In Chicago, 5,000 members of the local teachers union responded to a survey of job-related stress conducted by the RMC Research Corporation (November, 1977). Over half reported experiencing physical illness as a result of stress in their jobs, and about one-fourth said their jobs had caused some form of mental anxiety.

Soon after the results of the survey were released, *Chicago Union Teacher* reported, "This survey probably constitutes the largest study of job stress for a single group ever conducted in this country. The fact that there was such an overwhelming response to the survey indicates that the magnitude of the problem is much greater than even those that had initiated the survey had supposed."

Teachers reported experiences of physical assault, confrontations with colleagues and administrators, horrendous working condition , and various stress-related physical illnesses such as colitis, hypertension, sleeplessness, and ulcers. The perception of on-the-job stress was similar regardless of the teacher's race, sex, or subject taught.

Of 36 factors that could potentially cause stress, teachers listed these as most stressful: involuntary transfer (frequently associated with desegregation programs), managing disruptive children, notification of unsatisfactory performance, threats of personal injury, and overcrowded classrooms. Least stressful of all the events named were: taking additional course work for promotion, talking to parents about their children's problems, dealing with students whose primary language is not English, teacher-parent conferences, and voluntary transfer.

Many wish these stress factors could be reversed. If teachers must live with a certain amount of stress, better that it be directed toward student achievement and parent participation than physical safety and job security. Stress as a positive indicator is associated with concern; therefore, it is seen as a productive kind of stress. Unfortunately, when a teacher is literally or figuratively "under the knife," survival comes first.

If inservice training could help stress-vulnerable teachers cope with the conditions that precipitate their stress, attendance rates might im-

prove. A different method of attack would be for schools to reduce the stress-producing conditions identified by teachers in the Chicago study. As is frequently the case with student attendance problems, the solution that first comes to mind is a plan to modify people rather than environment. This approach seems more immediate, less far-reaching, less expensive, in a word, easier. As we shall see with attempts to change student behavior, this is often easier said than done.

Should Compulsory Attendance Laws Be Repealed?

In gathering government data for this fastback, a staff person at the U.S. Department of Labor supplied me with this useful distinction: "Schooling is an industry, education a process." The government's statistics on student and teacher attendance deal with schooling as an industry. So do a state's compulsory school attendance laws. They require a student's presence; they do not require or guarantee that he learn or be taught anything. Attendance laws make public schools the custodians of our children; not necessarily places to teach the right thing at the right time to fulfill each child's needs. Compulsory attendance laws keep the industry of schooling going. Competency and educational accountability are process issues quite distinct from daily attendance. These two aspects of school are linked by the assumption that students cannot benefit from what public schools have to offer unless they are there most of the time.

Many people think it's time this situation changed. If there is anything compulsory about school, say critics of current laws, it ought to be that public institutions be required to provide free learning opportunities for citizens of all ages, when and where those citizens can best utilize them. As for the students, they should be free to come and go. Perhaps not in the very early years, but certainly by adolescence people ought to be able to choose whether or not they want to attend school. If a 14-year-old does not take advantage of his right to a free public education, he should not be put in jail (the statutory penalty in every state but New York). Counseling and alternative work-study programs

ought to be available to students who wish to leave school—not prison. Punishing a student for not wanting to take advantage of his or her right to a free public education is roughly analogous to nabbing a citizen for not voting or not applying for social security.

The excessive penalty for nonattendance is only one aspect of current laws being questioned by many. The laws, while they are on the books in every state, are difficult and expensive to enforce. Many school officials ignore them, failing to report chronic truancies. Others uphold the laws selectively. (A disproportionate number of minority children are suspended or incarcerated for truancy.) A third criticism of the status quo is that conditions giving rise to compulsory attendance laws may no longer exist. The student population today is different from that of a century ago. Children mature at a younger age and, thanks to TV, are more worldly. They are also more questioning of authority (both their parents' and the school's) and more cognizant that "they do not shed their rights at the schoolhouse door."

Special problems are created by local attendance policies that apply to students past the maximum age for compulsory schooling and those who at 18 have reached their legal age of majority. Courts cannot force a 17-year-old to attend school, but school administrative policies can require the student to be present a certain number of days in order to receive course credit or graduate. Others who are less reflective argue simply that if students and their parents ignore the law, then, like Prohibition, it ought to be repealed—good, bad, or indifferent.

As it now stands, parents bear the primary responsibility for truancy. They are subject to criminal prosecution if they keep a child home or are found to be "in control" of the truant. Parents may be fined (rare) or imprisoned (even more rare) if it is found they caused the child to break the law. But many parents have no more influence in getting a child to school than the school has in keeping him or her there. If parents do not know about the truant behavior, or if they try and fail to correct it, they tell the court the truant child is "incorrigible" or "in need of supervision." The child can then be tried as a juvenile delinquent. The distinction as to whether the parents or the child is in violation of the law is usually made on the basis of the child's age. If he is young, chronic truancy is presumed to arise from

parents' actions. When children are older, the choice is presumed their own.

What schools and courts do to satisfy compulsory attendance laws depends on where a person lives and, to some extent, the financial resources of the school. A recent report, "Truancy in the Wisconsin Public Schools," observes that, "Statutory procedures for dealing with truancy are not being observed by many Wisconsin school districts." Attendance officers there are supposed to visit the homes of reported truants, but it is less expensive to send postcards. While parents are liable for these truants, district attorneys are unwilling to prosecute the parents. Instead, the child is usually placed under supervision in his own home. Other procedural options include counseling or placement in a foster home. Seldom are cases even referred to juvenile court in Wisconsin because the courts have no effective way of dealing with truancy.

In Stork County, Ohio, mass hearings of truancy cases with as many as 150 children and their parents are brought before the juvenile court at once. Those who admit to charges are fined. Those denying are granted separate hearings. This process saves court costs but moves even further away from examining individual problems and remedies.

In New York City the schools are required to notify parents of suspected truancy by mail, followed up with a telephone call. Continual truancy problems are supposed to be referred to the Bureau of Attendance, but the Public Education Agency, a consumer and student advocacy organization in the city, claims 60% of habitual truants are never referred. Of those who are, it is questionable how many are found. In New York City and other systems where money is in short supply, so are attendance officers.

John Splaine, a researcher in Maryland, has a different worry about compulsory attendance laws. Over the five-year period from 1970 to 1974, 300 juveniles were committed to penal institutions for the "crime" of truancy in this state. During the same time, nearly 3,000 others were committed to institutions as truants "in need of supervision." Even one child treated this way would be one too many, in Splaine's view. He considers it inhumane and imprudent to "incarcerate people for

not taking advantage of what is rightfully theirs." Splaine is one who would exchange *compulsory schooling* for *compulsory education*. Splaine says, "The state should be compelled to provide free public education for all our citizens, regardless of age, by using the considerable savings as a result of the deletion of compulsory attendance laws. Consequently, we could provide free education for those who, for one reason or another, do not avail themselves of educational opportunities at a young age. These persons would be able to resume their education with dignity, which is not presently the case."

Splaine is in good company. The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, funded by the Kettering Foundation in 1973, recommended, "The formal school-leaving age should be dropped to 14. Other programs should accommodate those who wish to leave school, and employment laws should be rewritten to assure on-the-job training in full-time service and work." In a separate recommendation, the commission said, "The Congress of the United States, in conjunction with state legislatures, should enact legislation that will entitle each citizen to 14 years of tuition-free education beyond kindergarten, only eight of which would be compulsory. The remaining six years should be available for use by anyone at any stage of his life. Congressional involvement is essential to assure equal access in an age of interstate mobility."

Even dissenters to the commission's prevailing view did not deny the efficacy of lowering the compulsory age if alternative educational activities are assured. One dissenter, John A. Stanavage, wrote: "That the compulsory aspects of school attendance and other school regulations are incompatible with a meaningful adolescence for many of our young people is not to be denied. Attempting to keep these young people within the confines of the school and apart from adult society has proved to be counterproductive. Thus, reducing the school leaving age to 14 might be therapeutic.

"However, unless concern is taken to provide those early school leavers with alternative forms of education and appropriate counseling once having left school, all we shall be doing is to doom them to economic and educational inferiority. Low-order work in our culture is not stimulating, not educative in itself. Untrained youth fares ill on

the job market today. Simply adding to that pool will exacerbate rather than ameliorate the situation."

Author/educator Pamela Neal of Arizona blames schools when attendance falls off. She says, "Wouldn't it be nice to think that we as educators could make education so attractive to the younger child that compulsory education laws would be unnecessary? I feel because secondary education is not compulsory in Arizona, we as educators are even more accountable for the quality of our education. If we see we are losing students, we know we must take a closer look at our programs and see where we are failing to provide for their needs."

Are Schools Partly To Blame for Truancy?

The National Association of Secondary School Principals has identified these factors as contributing to student truancy: family attitudes, social forces, peer pressure, economic circumstances (need to work), home-school relationship, school size, student age, and health. Added to this stock list are some new causes of unexcused absence: winter vacations, erosion of parental control, economic affluence, novel life-styles, and breakdown in enforcement of attendance laws. Of this long list, schools can readily change and control only three factors: the home-school relationship, school size, and the breakdown in the enforcement of attendance laws. We have already discussed the need to either enforce existing attendance laws or change them. Let's now consider the role of school size and the home-school relationship in unauthorized absences.

There is a small body of research relating to absences and the size of schools and school systems. It is interesting but not conclusive. Oliver R. Gibson, in a research paper titled "Absence, Legitimacy and System Size," shows evidence that the relationship of school size to attendance is curvilinear. His study of schools in the Chicago area found both the very small and very large school systems to have better attendance rates than medium to large ones, each for different reasons. When schools are very small, absences are highly visible, he reasons. When a student is absent, it is noticed. Also, a high level of friendship and loyalty can keep school-caused absences low. These effects decrease as the size of the system increases, until a high degree of

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formality and management efficiency takes over in very large systems, again depressing absences. What Gibson is observing in his formal research sounds like growing pains. Schools that have grown or consolidated may be making a mistake to rely on old informal means of keeping track of attendance. Instead they need to change to highly structured systems for the sake of efficiency. But where is the magic turning point when informal and friendly becomes slipshod and ineffective?

A study by John S. Wright of all schools in Virginia has somewhat different conclusions. He found absences to be linear; the bigger the school and the more urban the setting, the worse the attendance rates. Now maybe there aren't any schools in Virginia large enough to fit Gibson's formula for better attendance figures associated with the formal management system of a large school. If there are, maybe they haven't instituted efficient management systems. Wright also found that lowered teacher-pupil ratios had a slight positive effect on attendance, and that attendance was negatively related to the number of elective subjects offered in secondary schools.

Large and formalized schools may be efficient from a management viewpoint, but they are also impersonal and frequently inaccessible to parents and students. As schools and school systems grow, they tend to become less responsive to their clients—the students and their families. This contributes to the third absence factor that schools can control—home-school relations. When school units are kept small and manageable and maintain an atmosphere of openness to parents and citizens, friction is reduced, cooperation enhanced. At the National Committee for Citizens in Education (where the author is employed), we receive many letters from parents questioning local attendance policies. Some point out the illogic of suspending a child for truancy. Others have "excused" their own children to attend a 4-H meeting or go on a family outing only to find when the child returned to school his grades were lowered, he was sent to detention, or threatened with suspension.

There is such a wide variance in the enforcement of school attendance policies that parents are often surprised or angry when they discover the broad discretion school boards and building principals have to set rules and punish violators. Like the earlier example of the opera singer's son, some schools will go along with most decisions a family

makes to take a child out of school for a particular purpose. Others are in constant conflict with parents over the parameters of legal and illegal absences. Parents argue with some sense that a family trip to a museum or early dismissal for a meeting is as legitimate as school football practice or the art class's day-long field trip.

When schools fail to notify parents at the beginning of the year of guidelines for absences and the consequences of abusing them, families are rightfully incensed when children are penalized. An even better approach to improving home-school relations over the issue of attendance is to involve parents and mature students in setting policies the school and community can live with. If and when a consensus is reached, citizens and students will take more seriously their responsibilities to uphold attendance rules.

Student attendance is often reflective of school programs and the classroom learning environment. Does the way in which the teacher teaches affect student attendance? Without any research data, most adults would answer, "Yes, this is true regardless of the age of the child." It is probably fair to say that students who are well satisfied with a teacher's style and personality don't mind going to school. Repeated claims of stomachaches and vague illnesses by even young children who have previously made a good adjustment to school can signal a problem with an individual teacher. The teacher may be too strict, unfair, unprepared for class, bored with the class material, or distracted by personal problems. If teachers themselves are absent frequently, students may follow their lead. This has been substantiated by a study of five pilot schools conducted by the national parent-teacher association.

Research into the area of teaching styles that are best accepted by children, with high attendance as an indicator of satisfaction, is enlightening. Margaret Needels, in a paper presented at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, summarized the research done in 108 first-grade and 58 third-grade classrooms in several states by the Stanford Research Institute as part of a federally funded Follow Through program. The study tested the hypothesis that even very young children have the power to decide whether or not they will attend school. The prevailing view has been

that older children have more autonomy in making decisions about school attendance. Here are some of her observations about classroom teaching styles and their correlation with attendance.

Providing children with individual attention appears to be an important factor in student attendance, particularly one child with a teacher or aide in personalized reading instruction. In classrooms where the teacher or the aide was occupied by activities that did not include children, such as grading papers, preparing assignments, or cleaning up, there was a higher rate of absences.

Attendance was higher in classrooms where children were allowed more independence. Third-grade classrooms where children asked questions and where adults were responsive to the children showed lower absences. In third-grade classrooms where adults asked children open-ended questions, attendance was even higher.

Absences were higher in classrooms where children were not interacting but were listening to or observing adults. Adult punishment of children had the highest correlation with absences.

The classes at the Far West Laboratory and the University of Arizona that used a wide variety of educational activities and materials and where children exhibited independent behavior had the lowest absence rates.

A study by Rudolph H. Moos and Bernice S. Moos in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* 70 (1978) compared the achievement levels and absences among 19 classrooms at a single high school. Most students were enrolled in a college preparatory course. Subjects covered math, foreign languages, biology, English, and bookkeeping. This study did not rely on classroom observation as the Stanford study had, but it asked students and teachers to complete a "Classroom Environment Scale" measuring their perception of involvement, affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, competition, organization, teacher control, innovations, and clarity of rules. These are some of the findings. (While the correlations are clear, the researchers caution against assuming cause and effect.)

Average class grades and student absences are related to classroom climate. In classrooms where teachers gave higher average grades, teachers and students saw the environment as high in involvement and

low in teacher control. Classes with higher absenteeism were seen as high in competition and teacher control and low in teacher support. No differences were found in either grades or absenteeism among classes of different subject matter.

In a third study, conducted at the Career Study Center (CSC), an alternative public high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, students, parents, and teachers were interviewed. The study concluded, "Students feel CSC is significantly different and better than previously attended schools; there is more freedom and closer relationships with teachers; their basic skills, attendance, and understanding are improving."

These findings are nothing new. As early as 1928, Carl Ziegler in his classic study of school attendance as a factor in school progress observed, "Attendance of students in homerooms where the teachers were interested and concerned with their students was . . . significantly better than homerooms where the teachers were not." Nearly 50 years later, Lewis Kohler, speaking to the American Association of School Administrators, reframed Ziegler's findings: "Absenteeism has been recognized in many instances to be a symptom of poor supervision, management, and administration, leading to low morale, tardiness, inferior teaching, poor student achievement, and excessive school termination."

If the teaching style of a single teacher can adversely affect student attendance, think of the effect when morale is low among the entire faculty for such reasons as violence or the breakdown of teacher contract negotiations.

The threat of violence from truants and other youth can paralyze teachers and children and actually keep them away from school. In an award-winning article for the *Detroit News*, reporter Shelly Eichenhorn, a former teacher, posed as a high school student at Cody High School in order to witness firsthand the fractured and fearful lives of teachers in Detroit's secondary schools. Teachers were portrayed as locking their door against intruders, carrying weapons for protection, even lecturing on their fear of truant students and their planned defenses against assault. In Dayton, Ohio, teachers recently have won extra sick leave days to recover from an injury inflicted by students. Improving attendance when an atmosphere of violence prevails in a

school is contingent upon eliminating the root cause. This is a task that calls for total community action and is not likely to be corrected by simply improving administrative procedures for recording and detecting truancy.

When teacher morale is low because of a breakdown in contract negotiations or when a strike seems imminent, teachers' attendance plummets. So does the students'. A school board member in Willingboro, Pennsylvania, claims a four-week strike in November in her district affected student and teacher attendance for the rest of the year. In Boston, student attendance ranged between 5% and 10% during the week of a teachers' strike even though schools were officially open. This is a knotty problem for which I can't offer any solutions here, except to make the point that a student's motivation and attendance can suffer when a teacher's does.

When absences are caused by a student's personal problems in school or at home, individual attention is especially important. A student of normal or above-average intelligence whose school performance and attendance rates suddenly fall may be having a problem at home. It may be related to poverty, illness, or the parents' divorce. If the child does not have warm clothing to wear to school, is kept at home to babysit, is put to work, or is caring for a sick parent or sibling while adult family members work, these situations are relatively easy to identify and the school can take some action. Referral to social service and welfare agencies may help children in eligible families. In many rural and inner-city schools, the main work of the school PTA is providing warm clothing for students so they can attend school.

When truancy stems from the indifferent attitude of students or parents toward school, the problem is more difficult to pin down or solve. How do you get students to attend school if they and their parents don't think it is important? Some youth, especially minority students in urban schools, are discouraged by returning graduates who tell them their high school diploma will only help them land a job as a dishwasher. If schools are not preparing students for independence in adult life, they should undertake a serious assessment of their programs and standards. A renewed focus on career education is one way schools are responding that could have positive effects on attendance.

Programs To Reduce Absenteeism

There are roughly as many programs to reduce high absences as there are schools that are plagued with the problem. But some school campaigns are more successful than others. When schools embark on an absentee reduction program, they either try to change the institution or the students. Really comprehensive programs attack both ends of the problem at once. Dealing with sweeping institutional reform is beyond the scope of this brief treatment of the issue. Programs directed at changing the students' behavior usually involve three approaches: reward, punishment, or counseling students and their parents. Rewards may be material—candy, money, prizes; or social—class or individual praise and recognition, exemption from exams, social promotion, or improved grades. Punishments include automatic grade reduction, detention, nonpromotion, suspension, or legal action against student or parents. Counseling may take place individually or in groups, stressing the importance of good attendance for achievement and for landing and keeping a job.

Following are descriptions of programs and policies adopted by schools to improve attendance.

Savannah, Georgia, High School. Developed by school principal, incorporating some new districtwide policies.

Improvement Quotient: 22% first year, additional 10% to 20% second year, from 86% to 92% attendance.

1. To deter tardiness, following a 10-minute grace period during

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homeroom, students are not permitted to enter school without parental accompaniment.

2. Students who accumulate more than 10 unexcused absences in any given quarter receive no academic credit.
3. The homeroom with the highest ADA is privileged with a special field trip.
4. Special activities are planned on Mondays and Fridays since these days were identified as having a high rate of absence.
5. The quarter system has been adopted. Nonrestricted electives are open to enrollment from all grades. Twelve-week courses replace year-long courses.
6. Certificates of recognition are presented by the board of education to the high school, middle school, and elementary school with the highest attendance rate and most improved rate during each attendance period.
7. All truancy cases are referred to visiting teachers for court action where necessary.
8. Students 16 years of age who are consistently absent are notified by registered mail that they will be withdrawn after five calendar days if regular attendance is not established.
9. Alternative programs are offered to students with low self-concepts and attendance problems; for example, coordinated vocational and academic educational programs. Opportunities are provided for students to enroll in vocational and technical programs.
10. Homeroom teachers are continually requested to encourage student attendance.
11. Motivational posters, a graph of attendance, and certificates of recognition for attendance are displayed throughout the school.
12. Periodically, motivational announcements are made on the intercom during homeroom and in student publications.
13. Homeroom teachers are requested to telephone the parents of daily absentees and record the stated reasons for absences on attendance cards that are reviewed by assistant principals.
14. The pupil/teacher ratio has been reduced.

15. Teacher advisory groups have been formed to establish better communication among administrators, teachers, and students.
16. An administrative organization that embraces the school within a school concept has been developed.

Napa High School, Napa, California. To improve attendance, recommendations were made to the school administration by an attendance policy study committee and a faculty curriculum review committee. Approved by school PTSA.

Improvement Quotient: 50% first year. Non-illness absences reduced 40% (less than 4.5% on the average as compared with 8% to 12% the year before).

1. Students are allowed 12 days of absence per semester for illness, professional appointments, or serious personal or family problems (it is made clear to students that these are not authorized days of absence but are only to be used for illness and emergencies).
2. Thirteen or more absences during a semester can jeopardize a student's enrollment status; being tardy three times equals one absence. Parents are notified.
3. After the fourth, eighth, and twelfth absences from any class period, a form indicating absences is sent home to parents. Teacher counsels student after fourth absence, teacher and guidance counselor/administrator counsel after eighth and twelfth absences. Personal school contact with parents after eighth absence. Parent conference encouraged at this point.

Alexandria, Virginia. Cooperative effort of local police department and city school administration.

Improvement Quotient: 33% improvement first year in secondary schools, raising attendance from 85% to 90%.

1. Police pick up school-age juveniles frequenting shopping centers, parking lots, and residential streets and return them directly to their schools. During the first month of the pro-

gram, officers returned an average of three truants a day, mostly first-time offenders.

2. After the third violation by a student, case is examined and charges filed against student and parent. (Not only did truancy decrease, but number of local juveniles arrested for burglary decreased during the period. There were similar findings in Los Angeles, where "Operation Stay in School" resulted in improved attendance and lowered incidence of daylight burglaries, shoplifting, and school violence.)

Philadelphia Public Schools. Individual programs at schools designed by special attendance teams.

Improvement Quotient: As much as 33% in one year at any one school.

1. Teams composed of principal, school nurse, school-community coordinator, teacher, home-school visitor, and resource person in community have devised group and individual programs to boost classroom attendance. Some are described below.
2. Interclass competition. Joseph C. Ferguson Elementary School. Banners are awarded to display in classrooms with the best attendance.
3. Attendance lottery. Thomas Jr. High School. A day of attendance count is selected at random. All classes with 100% attendance on that day receive a prize.
4. Crossing guard monitors. W. C. Bryant School. Guards volunteer time on rotating basis to check on tardy students. After being tardy three times, a conference is requested with parents. Certificates are awarded to children with no tardiness.

Cora Howe Elementary School, Nashville, Tennessee. This inner-city school's attendance program was developed jointly by PTA and school administration.

Improvement Quotient: Significant drop in number of tardy students.

1. Students call classmates who have been absent to remind them to come to school the next day. Classes compete for best attendance record.

2. Parent volunteers call homes when children are absent and homes where parents are known to leave early for work in order to waken children.
3. A pupil personnel team consisting of a psychologist, social worker, nurse, attendance teacher, special teachers, and the coordinator of pupil services help students and parents acquire medical, psychological, and dental care needed to resume regular school attendance.
4. A report on absenteeism is given at each PTA meeting.
5. The school system prepares incentive posters and brochures on school attendance for parents.

South Range Elementary School, Derry, New Hampshire. Program developed by PTA under supervision of school administration.

Improvement Quotient: Individual successes.

1. A mini-conference was held to orient everyone involved with the project.
2. A system of record keeping was initiated to record and monitor each pupil's absences. Recording is done by school volunteers.
3. Teachers routinely submit an absenteeism form using a code to facilitate recording procedures.
4. Forms requesting reasons for absences are sent to parents when no note is received by the teacher.
5. Teachers are given the responsibility of telephoning parents to seek the cause of absences.
6. An alternative means of handling court-related problems resulted in a student at South Range making restitution for vandalism at the junior high school through a work program rather than face the possibility of incarceration.
7. A teacher on the staff became a volunteer probation officer, thus enabling her to work closely with one pupil who, as a result, remained in school.
8. As a result of the project, the number of school volunteers more than doubled, offering extra hands in the classrooms.

9. PTA emergency funds were used to purchase footwear, making it possible for one student to attend school regularly.
10. An award program was begun to reward pupils in both academic and nonacademic areas.

Lake Oswego High School, Lake Oswego, Oregon. New administrative policy.

Improvement Quotient: 70% over three years.

1. Policy provides that absences are excused only if they have been prearranged or if there is student illness, family illness, or an emergency. Otherwise, a student is expected to attend every class period every day. Attendance is taken each period.
2. Truant absences result in a grade of zero for all classes missed. Truancies are handled as follows:

First truancy:	Notification of parents
Second truancy:	One-day suspension and parent conference
Third truancy:	Three-day suspension and notification of county attendance officer
Fourth truancy:	Informal hearing to discuss possibility of student expulsion.

Hannibal High School, Hannibal, Missouri.

Improvement Quotient: 60% of dropouts returned to school and 50% of the students with attendance problems showed marked improvement.

Principal refers reported cases of truancy to the school-community court coordinator who serves as a liaison between school, home, community, and juvenile department. The coordinator maintains close personal contact with the students and their parents.

North High School, Omaha, Nebraska. Program initiated by school principal with aid of an attendance committee.

Improvement Quotient: Tardiness reduced 50% over two years, absences by 25%, reversing a steady decline for the five previous years. Corresponding improvement in grades as attendance improved.

1. Counselors relieved of attendance responsibility for 85% of students who do not have attendance problems. Instead, they concentrate on 15% with poor records. Parental conferences are part of an individual approach to solving school absence problems.
2. Students with no more than two and one-half days absence a semester, or fewer than six times tardy are excused from exams (unless they are in danger of failing a course).
3. Campaign to impress on students importance of regular attendance. The value of dependability to prospective employers stressed.

The attendance improvement programs described above are varied, yet all have been successful in a particular setting. All have elements in common: 1) The policy is broadcast before it is implemented. Students and parents know what to expect; 2) the programs are well organized and school officials follow through; 3) the policies are applied evenly and fairly to all without exception; and 4) the policies combine student responsibility with school responsiveness.

In some of the programs, volunteer and parent responsibility for student attendance played an important role in the success of the programs. In fact, some studies found that parents calling homes to check on absentees had a better rate of success than professional staff, perhaps because the call was seen as less threatening.

Conclusion

The problem of student and teacher absenteeism discussed in this fastback is not an easy one to resolve. Many of the factors contributing to student absenteeism are beyond the direct control of the school. They are problems of the broader society. Our schools, however, are a vital part of that society and they have the talent and resources to remedy at least some of the problems. That some school systems have adopted successful programs to curb a rising absentee rate is proof of this. Such programs should be expanded to other schools facing rising absenteeism.

Teacher absenteeism is a more subtle problem with which to deal. Both administrators and teachers acknowledge abuse of sick leave, but it is frequently difficult to prove. However, the disparity in teacher absentee rates among different school districts is quite convincing evidence that abuse does occur. It seems likely that as teachers unions bargain for more control of working conditions and other benefits, school boards and parents will, in turn, demand greater accountability from teachers, including stricter attendance policies.

In the final analysis, the problem of attendance will diminish when our schools become places where children enjoy going to learn and where teachers find satisfaction and fulfillment in their work. This is a tall order but one to strive for.

Fastback Titles

(Continued from back cover)

85. Getting It All Together: Confluent Education
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